



# Flowering of Nicodemus

The official newsletter of Nicodemus National Historic Site

May 2007  
Vol. 4: Issue 2

## From the Superintendent

As we move into summer, the pace is picking up here at Nicodemus National Historic Site! We are trying to keep up with the mowing – more rain means Maintenance Worker Robert Brogden stays very busy. But, we will not complain about the rain! It has been a blessing, not only for the young American elm trees planted in the park two years ago, but also for the crop and pasture land in the area. Park Ranger Phyllis Howard has been conducting distance-learning sessions with classrooms (see our web site for more information, <http://www.nps.gov/nico/forteachers/index.htm>). Our new Park Guide Michelle Huff is learning Nicodemus history and helping visitors. Administrative Technician Betsy Crawford-Gore, who works at Fort Larned National Historic Site, is keeping us “on track” with our budget. Unfortunately, our busy schedules mean this May newsletter is reaching you late -- our apologies!

Washburn University returned to Nicodemus on May 14<sup>th</sup> to conduct some more archeological excavations. Dr. Margaret Wood and eight students were looking for a dugout site just to the west side of the Nicodemus District No. 1 School. They were here for three weeks and enjoyed talking with everyone who stopped by the site. The American Legion Post No. 270 members (owners of the School property) graciously allowed this investigation. Last year, National Park Service archeologists used some ground-penetrating radar instruments to survey the site. Their readings indicated some possibility for finding a buried dugout. Additionally, Mr. Donald Moore and Mr. Fred Switzer both remembered an old dugout behind the School. Some residents remember a Matthews family dugout in the vicinity of the School, although most think that dugout was located further to the west towards the former Sayers house. But, the Washburn students were unable to find a dugout on the School lot and, based on what Mr. Moore and Mr. Switzer remembered, we think it may be located on an adjacent property to the west. So, that was disappointing. However, the students did locate a trash dump and several privies, including one fairly old privy lined with wood. Look on page 2 for pictures of the Washburn students at work.

The first two weeks of June also saw another archeological

excavation in the area – the Kansas State Historical Society and the Kansas Anthropological Association sponsored their annual “Kansas Archeology Training Program” (KATP) near Nicodemus! They continued excavating the dugout sites that Washburn worked on last year--the Thomas Johnson family house and cellar located about 2 ½ miles north of Nicodemus.

The KATP field school drew over 130 volunteers (15-50 per day) for the two week period. Anyone could participate in the field school and it provided an excellent opportunity for several students considering a career in archeology to gain some first-hand experience. The KATP was supported in part by Challenge Cost Share funding from the National Park Service. The archeologist leading this two-week KATP field school was Dr. Florie Bugarin from Howard University. Two Howard University students came with Dr. Bugarin. The KATP field school ended June 17. See page 4 for more information on the KATP.

Building these partnerships with Washburn University and Howard University is very important for the park. Their involvement provides more students with first-hand knowledge of the important history preserved of Nicodemus. The professors or one of their students may become so interested in this history, that they sponsor more research, adding to our knowledge of the early history of Nicodemus. It takes very little investment by the park to gain so much from these partnerships!

Another exciting event occurred on June 7. We sponsored a free “Preserving Your Family Papers & Historic Photographs” workshop. Fourteen participants learned about caring for their artifacts. Later this summer, we are working on some minor stabilization projects and will again work with the Homecoming Committee for the upcoming 129<sup>th</sup> Homecoming Celebration at the end of July. We hope to see you at Nicodemus National Historic Site sometime this summer!

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*The following pictures are a few of the photos taken during the archeology dug by Dr. Margaret Wood and students on the site behind the Nicodemus School District No. 1 building.*



*The Washburn University students work on a possible privy site behind the Nicodemus School District No. 1 building (left).*

*Students measure and map all items found in a test pit (right).*



Photos: NPS



*All the dirt removed from the test pits is sifted so no small artifacts are missed (left).*

*Items found in the test pit in the trash dump included pipes, rusty cans and a pail, glue bottles, chalk, and pencil leads (right).*



## Nicodemus Businesses Recognized in an NPS Publication

A recently published book, [Stewardship Begins With people: An Atlas of Places, People, and Handmade Products](#), features the Nicodemus Flour Coop and Ernestine's Bar-B-Q Sauce. Published by the National Park Service's Conservation Study Institute, the book highlights stories of people who are working to sustain their cultural and natural heritage in significant landscapes across the United States. This Atlas "offers a fresh perspective on the sustainability

of national parks and their neighboring communities, and illustrates the many different ways parks...are working in partnership with local people..." The book talks about the work of Gil Alexander, Sharyn Dowdell-Kountz, Edgar Hicks, Gary Alexander and other members of the Nicodemus Flour Coop and Angela Bates, proprietor of Ernestine's Bar-B-Q Sauce. The authors note that Congress has recently asked "the National Park Service to explore viable ways to encourage the sale of traditional products in national parks that 'reflect, educate, and celebrate the unique history, spirit, culture, and natural treasures of the...parks.'" Other people and places featured include work by the Navajo (Diné) at Canyon de Chelle National Monument to protect their watersheds and preserve historic peach trees and Churro sheep herds. At New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, the park is working with the GHB Jazz Foundation and the City of Mandeville to preserve and make historic jazz recordings available to visitors. And, a partnership between Haleakalā National Park and Native Hawaiian residents focuses on "reestablishing and learning from the tradition of *Mālama`āina* (care for and love of the land)." Copies of the publication are available the Conservation Study Unit in Woodstock, Vermont (802-457-3368 or [stewardship@nps.gov](mailto:stewardship@nps.gov)).

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## "Where in the World is..." Nicodemus, Kansas??"

Did you ever wonder who comes to visit Nicodemus National Historic Site? We conducted an in-depth survey of visitors July 23-September 13, 2005. We found that our visitors came primarily from Kansas and surrounding states--no surprises there! The survey our visitors come from (by percentage): 46 % from Kansas; 8% Nebraska and Colorado; 4% California and Missouri; 3% Illinois, Arkansas, Texas; 2% Minnesota and Florida; 1% Indiana, New York, Mississippi, Arizona, Wyoming, Oregon, Wisconsin, Virginia, New Jersey; and less than 1% were international visitors.

While this survey represents only one month, we believe it is a fairly accurate representation. Did you notice there were **international** visitors? We also maintain a log book at the front desk in the visitor center where visitors can sign in and identify their home. Between May 2004 and May 2007, we had the following number of international visitors sign our log book: 17 were from Canada; 8 from New Zealand; 7 from the Netherlands; 6 from England; 5 from Germany; 4 from Australia; 2 each were from Scotland, Czech Republic, France, Switzerland, and Bermuda; and 1 each from Iraq, Virgin Islands, Venezuela, Argentina, Sweden, and Malaysia. You might say Nicodemus is becoming "WORLD FAMOUS"!

## Workshop Held June 7th

Nicodemus National Historic Site sponsored a free hands-on workshop on “Preserving Family Papers & Historic Photographs” at the Visitor Center/Township Hall on Thursday June 7, 2007. The fourteen people participating learned about historic types of photographs and about storing their family papers and pictures. Nancy Sherbert and Darrell Garwood from the Kansas State Historical Society talked about the ways to care for these valued items. Deborah Dandridge familiarized everyone with the “Nicodemus Historical Society” and other African American collections held at the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. Angela Bates of the Nicodemus Historical Society, Betty Elliott of the Graham County Historical Society, and Sandi Rogers of the Rooks County Historical Society also shared information on their collections. Each participant received a reference book and a package of archival materials to take home. Nicodemus National Historic Site offered this workshop to encourage the preservation of historical objects related to the history of Nicodemus, Kansas and to encourage preservation of historic objects in general.



*Participants in the workshop.*

*NPS: Photos*

*KATP volunteers take a break from field work to learn conservation techniques.*



*Deborah Dandridge, Spencer Research Library, discusses the Nicodemus collection.*

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*[The following essay by Melvina Williams appeared in the Winter 2006-2007 issue of the Solomon Valley Anthology. The Anthology is the official publication of the Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance, Inc. This essay received honorable mention for first call adult essay.]*

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## “A Tribute to Nicodemus’ First Post Mistress”

Elizabeth Emily Risby Williams was born January 12, 1891, in Abilene, Dickinson County, Kansas. She departed her earthly walk on November 27, 1954 in Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas. She was a gift from God to her parents Samuel and Margaret Horton Risby because all their children born on the plantation were victims of infant mortality. The Risby family migrated from Scott County, Kentucky. They were seeking a better place with freedom and civil rights. They moved west by boarding a westbound train at the Georgetown, Kentucky, train depot. Their destination was Ellis, Kansas, about 40 miles south of Nicodemus, the so-called “promised Land” for ex-slaves.

Traveling with them was their only little girl. She met her demise on the train. To bury their daughter, Margaret and Samuel disembarked from the train east of Solomon, Kansas. Some were beside the tracks they dug her grave.

Since they were traveling on faith and did not know what was before them, they decided to return to Abilene by foot. They accepted and made Abilene their “Promised Land.” They did what was necessary to survive. This new community, Abilene, was at the end of the Chisholm Trail.

Elizabeth was their first child born out of slavery and thrived in Abilene. This determined couple kept hope alive and reared all their children in this community. The other children were Zack Milton, Pearl, Sylvester, and John. They all obtained their education in the Abilene Public School system. Elizabeth shared with her children that the schools were integrated. She and Dwight D. Eisenhower attended the same school.

During Elizabeth’s childhood, her mother shared with her children the stories of the deplorable living conditions that existed on their master’s Kentucky plantation. Among the sad circumstances they had to endure was the loss of their infant children. Margaret was the mother of several children prior to the freeing of the slaves in the United States in 1865. Their master provided little to almost no accommodations for his slaves. The slaves were fed from animal troughs. No dishes or pans or eating utensils were furnished.

In 1907 Elizabeth worked for the Abilene Public Library while she was in high school. The city administrators kept her employment a secret from the public. She was required to enter the back door to report to work.

After completing her college education in Salina, Elizabeth accepted a teaching position in western Kansas. Logan County was one of the

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few counties that hired African American school teachers in Kansas. It was near Gill in Logan County. Her salary was \$35.00 per month. Her housing and food were provided by a local family that lived near the school for a minimum fee. While living in this community she met Charles "Charlie" Alexander Williams. He was a member of the legendary Emmaline G. Johnson Williams clan. He as a resident of Nicodemus but went west to find a mate, his rib.

Elizabeth and Charles were married March 22, 1910. They made their home in Nicodemus. To this union twelve children were born, but only ten lived to adulthood.

The children were Emmaline Geneva (Elmer L.) Griffie, Margaret Oetna (Kenneth, who changed his name to Garfield) Napue, Theresa Louis (Virgil, Sr.) Robinson, Charles Williams (died in infancy), Eugene Stanley Williams, LuElla Elizabeth Bronson (John) Holmes, Ernestine Carolyn (Philip) Van Duvall, Rev. Chester Alexander (Vera L. Jones) Williams, Alberta Mae Williams Woods, Charlesetta Marvene (James R.) Bates, Wanda Lee (Mrs. A.D.) Adams, and Loretta Williams (died in infancy).

On August 21, 1921, Elizabeth was hired to be the first African American Postmistress assigned to serve at the Nicodemus Post Office. Elizabeth was proud of her ability to uphold her guarantee for receiving and shipping baby chicks at the rate of 95 to 100% live delivery. She served in this capacity until October 30, 1933. Then George M. Sayers, one of the prominent Sayers brothers of the SV vicinity, became the next Postmaster.

There's an old adage that says, "The fruit does not fall too far from the tree." This is true of Emma, her daughter. In time she followed in her mother's footsteps. She worked as an assistant G. M. Sayers until his retirement. On January 31, 1940, Emma was assigned to be the Nicodemus Postmistress. She worked this assignment until March 31, 1944.

Elizabeth and Charles Williams were an adventurous and prosperous couple. Charles was County Road Maintenance Man, using horse-drawn (manual) graders. He was a farmer with carpenter skills, a tap dancer, and a water dowser. The couple also managed a mercantile store in their home. They stocked nonperishable grocery items while rearing a family. The cooperative store was established and functioned as an investment for the local community members. The store was destroyed by fire in 1926.

Elizabeth's qualifications and teaching experience made it possible for her to work as a substitute teacher for School District No. 1 in Graham County, Nicodemus Township.

Charles and Elizabeth's daughters organized a gospel singing group known as the "Williams Sisters" of Nicodemus. They broadcast from a western Kansas radio station for a while. In 1972 they made a gospel recording. It has been re-recorded and made available for marketing.

Since Elizabeth possessed a spirit of quiet dignity, she will always be remembered by those of who know here by that description. She was a creative person with leadership skills for organizing church and community projects. She demonstrated her leadership skills by holding various offices in the Nicodemus First Missionary Baptist Church and Sunday School.

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## **Exciting Exploration Continues at the Thomas Johnson Family Dugout Sites!**

The Kansas Anthropological Association and the Kansas State Historical Society have been conducting their annual "Kansas Archeology Training Program" (KATP) excavations at the Thomas Johnson family dugouts north of Nicodemus. The Kansas Anthropological Association (KAA) is a non-profit organization of amateur and professional archeologists. Established in 1955, KAA has become a large and active group whose diverse members share a common interest in the prehistoric and historic peoples of the Central Plains. For many years the KAA has had a close working relationship with the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) Archeology Office; each June KSHS and KAA cosponsor the [Kansas Archeology Training Program \(KATP\)](#). They offer the public a unique opportunity to work alongside professional and avocational archeologists. Participants assist the archeologists in excavating sites, cleaning and cataloguing artifacts in the lab, and learning related techniques through various courses and evening public lectures. The KATP ran from June 2 through June 17.

Last year, Dr. Margaret Wood and students from Washburn University began the excavations of the Johnson house and cellar dugouts. However, they only had time to excavate about a third of each dugout. The KATP participants re-opened the house and cellar sites and also explored a trash dump area and a possible livestock shed or barn area. They walked over the approximately 40 acres surrounding the dugout sites, conducting a surface survey. The possible barn location did not yield many artifacts, but the trash dump was very rich with lots of rusted cans and broken or whole ceramic and glass items. Digging in the cellar dugout, volunteers found entire ceramic pieces, the door frame and hinges, and the base of a treadle sewing machine. Two of the volunteers reported smelling a smoked meat smell as they worked at the bottom of some of the test pits!

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At the house site on the lower part of the slope, the mystery continues...it is still not clear exactly how the house was constructed. Yvonne Sayers remembers her mother talking about the back portion of the house being a sod house and the front, kitchen portion being frame. And, the KATP volunteers uncovered areas streaked with light and dark shades of dirt that could be sod walls. However the site is partially below ground, with earth steps leading down to the original floor level. The stone wall found last year by Washburn University does not consistently extend around the other sides of the house.

We were thrilled to see young volunteers working at the site every day! Also, on Monday June 4, six youngsters with the Wichita NAACP Chapter youth group were on-site, helping with the excavations. Our thanks go out to the owner of the property, Mr. Veryl Switzer, to Mr. Bobby Atkisson who runs cattle on the land, and to Mr. Gil Alexander who allowed the volunteers to park at his house! With their generous cooperation, this very important house place is yielding some clues about the early years in Nicodemus. We'll include more pictures and a summary of the findings in a future newsletter.



*Dr. Florie Burgarin of Howard University was the Principle Investigator. Dr. Bugarin will be completing the report on the KATP field school (left).*

*Dr. Virginia Wulfkuhle (at right); KSHS handled the logistics with KAA members (center)*



*Photos: NPS.*



*KATP participants work on the house site (left) and the dugout cellar at the Thomas Johnson Family dugout site, located north of Nicodemus*



*Dr. Robert Hoard, State Archaeologist (KSHS), did most of the site surveying (left).*

*Streaks may indicate sod blocks used in the house construction (right).*



*KAA volunteers in the test pits at the house site(left).*

*Photos: NPS*

*Junior archeologists - members of a youth group of the Wichita Chapter NAACP learn from KAA member Mike Wallen (right).*



*KATP volunteers clean and catalog artifacts found at the Johnson site. The lab was located in the Demar Junior High School, about 3 miles south of Nicodemus(above).*

## News From Our Park Partners

### Nicodemus Township Board

Spring has arrived and with the recent moisture and warmer temperatures, the weeds are thriving!! Now that the weather seems to be stabilizing, we encourage everyone to keep up with their mowing so the town looks nice! The Board is working on finishing the installation of the new playground equipment. We are also looking into the possibility of some grants to refinish the streets and upgrade the Priscilla Arts Club building. And how about that new roof on the Township Hall!! What an improvement. Hats off to Val Williams and his crew for a great job.

### Nicodemus Flour Co-op

Our main goal this spring/summer is to find a home so we can mill flour again. The tef project is coming along nicely. We continue to be in contact with several entities interested in acquiring tef products.

### Homecoming Committee

The same few brave souls have assembled again this spring to plan the 2007 Homecoming. We really need more participation -- it would be appreciated if we could get some ideas from descendants. This year we celebrate the 130<sup>th</sup> birthday of Nicodemus (1877-2007) and it would be great to have some new and exciting events. We plan to focus on Education and we need a snappy theme, a t-shirt design and any other thoughts you might share with us on making this year special. You can e-mail us at [dowdell@ruraltel.net](mailto:dowdell@ruraltel.net).

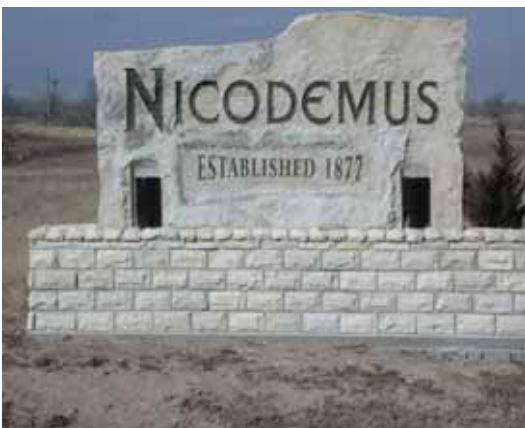


Photo: NPS

*Limestone sign off Highway 24 at Nicodemus, Kansas.*

## Happy 130th Anniversary, Nicodemus

On April 18, 1877, papers creating the Nicodemus Town Company were registered with the Kansas Secretary of State. On June 8, the plat for the town site is registered at the General Land Office in Kirwin, Kansas. Simon P. Roundtree, Secretary of the Town Company, was the first settler to arrive on June 18, 1877.

## African American Experience in Kansas

Nicodemus National Historic Site hosted the "African American Experience in Kansas" traveling trunk exhibit in March. Several people stopped by to view the contents and learn about the African American experience in Kansas. The contents in the truck ranged from items from Africa such as the Ugandan mbira (thumb piano), a Zulu basket, an Ndebele beaded doll, and more. There were items from the cowboy era. Items about the influences of African American through the years were in the trunk.

Visitors were able to learn about the Buffalo Soldiers in Kansas. Notable African Americans from Kansas such as poet Gwendolyn Brooks, poet Langston Hughes, writer Gordon Parks, and (from Nicodemus) Veryl Switzer, to name a few. Visitors were able to learn about the Negro Baseball League and view memorabilia of the Kansas City Monarchs. There were books about the history of Nicodemus. Visitors had the opportunity to stop by the Township Hall Center for programs about the trunk three consecutive Saturdays as well as during the week.

The traveling trunk was on loan from the Kansas State Historical Society.

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## Monthly Coffee Hour

The general public is welcome to attend our monthly coffee hour the second Friday of each month from 5:00pm – 6:00pm at the Township Hall (Visitor Center) located at 304 Washington Avenue in Nicodemus, Kansas. There will be updates of activities around the site and light refreshments.

Nicodemus is located on Highway 24, 13 miles east of Hill City and 19 miles west of Stockton.

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## Join the NPS Team !!

You can be a member of the team of 145,000 volunteers in the National Park System. The National Park System comprises 391 areas covering more than 84 million acres in every state (except Delaware), the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. These areas include national parks, monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, historic sites, lakeshores, seashores, recreation areas, scenic rivers and trails, and the White House. See the article on the next page about volunteers recently honored by the NPS-Midwest Region.

## Midwest Region Selects Hartzog Volunteer Award Recipients

*[The below article shows how volunteers in the National Park Service can make a difference and how the Park Service shows its appreciation for their hard work and dedication.]*

*By LaTonya Miller/Bettie Blake, NPS-Midwest Regional Office, Omaha, Nebraska*

The Midwest Region is pleased to announce the following winners of the region's George B. Hartzog, Jr. Awards for outstanding volunteer service for fiscal year 2006.

Kerry Kelly, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, was selected for the "Outstanding Individual Volunteer" award. Mr. Kelly has donated more than 500 hours of his time to create, edit, enhance, and update the park website. He also produced three interpretive brochures, a searchable wildflower database, and a comprehensive park sign inventory.

For the "Outstanding Volunteer Group Service" award, the Adopt-A-Trail (AAT) Program at Cuyahoga Valley National Park was selected. This volunteer group has successfully executed a multi-generational trail maintenance program that assists the park in maintaining safe and well-groomed trails while preserving the natural and cultural resources.

Fort Scott National Historic Site has been chosen for the region's "Park VIP Program Award." The volunteers enable the park to sponsor a number of special events, living history activities, and support to other parks. Volunteers at the site remain active for decades, which is tribute to the park.

The National Park Service created these awards to honor volunteers for their hard work, draw attention to their vast skills and contributions, and to stimulate development of innovative projects and volunteer involvement. The awards are named for former Director George B. Hartzog, Jr. who established the Volunteer-In-Parks (VIP) program on November 17, 1970.

The Washington Office received the names of the regional winners in late March. The national winners were honored at a luncheon in Washington, D.C. on May 3.

The Midwest Region salutes all of the nominees and award recipients for their numerous contributions to our national parks and the Volunteer-In-Parks program. As one of our review panel said, "It is inspiring to see so many people, throughout the parks, contribute their time and expertise to benefit the parks." Volunteers enable park employees to do their jobs better and meet park goals. Congratulations to our award recipients!



*Volunteer Kerry Kelly from Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore - Empire, Michigan <http://www.nps.gov/slbe/>*



*Volunteers of the Adopt-A-Trail (AAT) Program at Cuyahoga Valley National Park - Brecksville, Ohio <http://www.nps.gov/cuva/>*

Photos: NPS



*Volunteers at Fort Scott National Historic Site - Fort Scott, Kansas <http://www.nps.gov/fosc>*



National Park Service  
U. S. Department of the Interior

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## EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

*The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.*

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785-839-4233 Visitor Center  
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Federal Job Announcements  
(USAJOBS)  
[www.usajobs.opm.gov](http://www.usajobs.opm.gov)

*The **Flowering of Nicodemus** is a quarterly publication of Nicodemus National Historic Site.*

## Distance Learning Opportunity

We were able to successfully connect with an eighth grade history class at Exeter-Milligan Public Schools in Exeter, Nebraska through the distance-learning station after several failed attempts. Once all the technical difficulties were worked out, the video lesson went well. The class covers American History to the Civil War. The teacher wanted students to learn why African Americans settled in the West, how the site was picked, and the problems that the settlers faced once in the area. The teacher also wanted students to be able to compare how different groups settled on the western plains.

Students learned about the history of Nicodemus and the significance of the role African American played in the westward movement. They learned about the push out of the South and the pull of the West for former slaves. Information was given about the similarities and differences between the settlement of Nicodemus and other towns on western plains. Comparison was made between the environment conditions of Kentucky and Kansas. The students were able to ask questions about the town, its past and present population, and the future prospects of Nicodemus. To arrange a distance-learning program, contact Park Ranger Phyllis Howard at 785-839-4233 or visit <http://www.nps.gov/nico/forteachers/index.htm>.